

IDENTIFYING BIRDS AFIELD

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ON going afield with an experienced observer of birds the beginner is usually surprised as well as puzzled at the readiness with which the various species are discerned, identified and pointed out for his further study. Frequently it is little more than a fleeting glimpse near at hand, or a bird in the distance, whose song, call note or color cannot be had, yet an almost intangible bit or chain of evidence proclaimed to the keen and experienced observer the identity of the species in question. Broadly speaking this method of identifying birds afield may be termed a "process of elimination" and fitness to accurately apply such a process can only be attained after careful study and long and close observation. More time given to studiously watching birds when found and less toward building up big daily lists is the means by which this knowledge may be had. There are many enthusiastic students of bird life who, after years of work in the open, are still dependent upon note or song or upon a reasonably close view of the coloration of plumage before they are at all sure of their bird. In fact so much has been said and written of color keys and field glasses that the tyro might readily believe that little else may avail in his efforts to identify. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to maintain that no less a factor is knowledge of the fact that each species of birds have pronounced characteristics, mannerisms, habits and habitats which may be learned as certainly as color and song and used as a convenient method of identification on trips afield. I have a good friend whose ear is so keen, and so well attuned by practice, that he has only to hear the faintest note or muttering of some bird to be able to name it.

I have other friends who have their color keys so clearly charted in their minds that with a bit of study as to color and size they feel safe in naming their bird. But what of the occasions when glasses are not at hand or when the light is poor, and what of the birds that are silent or out of earshot. My own plan is to rely much less on color and song than upon mannerisms, feeding habits and habitat, and thus while my friend with glasses is trying for a view as to color, I have passed on and perhaps recorded a dozen more that would else have flown away and thus escaped my record.

So varied are these characteristics that a few will be cited here, such as position of body and tail in flight, method of wing stroke, manner of alighting, position of body after alighting, location chosen in tree or shrub for alighting, conduct of the bird after it has alit, method of hopping, walking or scratching, uneasiness or the reverse, position of birds while feeding on branches or fly-catching in mid-air, method of flocking or appearing singly or scattered, shape assumed by flocks, special mannerisms during period of courtship, etc., etc.

As illustrations for some of the points enumerated, let us take some of the birds of prey. Those familiar with both the Black and Turkey Vultures can readily identify them at a distance of a mile by watching for a few moments the time and method of wing beat. Aside from this the Turkey Vulture is usually found close to the ground seeking its food, while the Black species more often soars at a great height where he can keep a dozen Turkey Vultures under surveillance and thus rob the first one of them that locates food. Passing to the hawks, we know of the characteristic soaring habits of the Redtail and the Broad-wing and contrast with them the rapid, low, direct flight of the Coopers and the Sharp-shinned. Those who have watched the Sparrow Hawk hover in mid air over a hay field need only to remember this characteristic to separate it from the Sharp-shinned and the Pigeon Hawk and if another long range characteristic is required it will be found that the Sparrow Hawk chooses for its perch a site that would rarely or never be chosen by the other two small species. And again, with reference to the latter, there are field characteristics just as pronounced between the Sharp-shinned and Pigeon Hawk.

Taking up next an ever puzzling family for the amateur, the sparrows, the study of their habits and habitat will be found to be the most accurate as well as the most rapid method of listing these dull colored little birds. Let us take for instance the White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows. The former when startled will work its way upward to the top of some shrub in the thicket and there eye the intruder with body poised upright and crest erected, the very personification of the wild Canadian country in which he is reared. His cousin, the White-throat, is sociable and good natured, showing no great fear and only a desire to slouch along with his fellows and to move on, feeding unconcernedly as he does so. Tho greatly as these two

sparrows differ in their dispositions, specimens examined together in the hand show that in size and markings they differ but slightly. Taking two more species of about the same size, we will consider the Field and Chipping Sparrows. Aside from the longer tail and lighter color of the former, one must, at a distance rely upon their movements for their identity. It will be found that the Chipping Sparrow feeds in the trees, shrubs and upon the bare ground or close-cropped grass, while the Field Sparrow chooses the weeds, briars and ground covered with long grass. He is a bird of the brush while the Chipping is a bird of the open; aside from habitat the two may be distinguished from each other by their manner of flight and other characteristics. And so in turn might I take up each member of the sparrow family and recite how each has one or more characteristics not shared by its cousins and which are quite as infallible, or more so, than field observation of color or song. In no closely allied family are mannerisms as distinct as among the woodpeckers. Mere coloration, size and call notes facilitate identification but close observations will reveal that each species has its own distinct manner of going about its climbing, pecking, prying, hammering, flying and feeding. Take for instance the Sapsucker, which clings close to an upright limb and keeps the better part of a stout one between himself and the observer, as tho he expected to be shot at for his sapsucking proclivities. Then take the Downy or the Red-bellied woodpeckers, which, apparently knowing the good they do, have none of sneak about them and trustingly show themselves in full, making a clatter about it all the while. That splendid member of the woodpecker family, the Pileated, has an individuality and nobility about him that commands wonder and respect. When one has won the confidence of one of these birds its gentleness is surprising and the dignity of its bearing begets for it both respect and interest.

The great warbler family is no exception to the law of varied field characteristics and aside from colors and markings, all of the items which I have mentioned may be brought to bear to bring about a process of elimination, and so come quickly to proper identification. I confess, that with this family, I have not fully mastered the process which I have outlined but knowing that my friend with keen ear has mentioned 57 varieties of thin, weak warbler chips, I have little doubt that their mannerisms will be found to differ in a pronounced way.

Passing on to a few scattering examples which are probably well known to most observers, I will recall to your mind how the shrike flies its low level flight and then at the end rises abruptly to a point of vantage, how the Palm Warbler identifies itself by nervously twitching its tail, how the Water-Thrushes make their identity easy by bobbing up and down, how certain ducks dive while others only feed in shallow water, how the Chat, and also the Yellow-throat, may be identified at a distance when he mounts high in air and then falls pell mell to earth again; how the Nighthawk is at home on the wing while his near cousin, the Whip-poor-will, prefers to rest on a woodland bough; how the Grey-cheeked Thrush will allow close approach while his very near cousin, the Olive-backed, is as wild and as wary as a Great Horned Owl, and so on. I might cite many more well known examples with which you are familiar.

Summing it all up, one will find that the most interesting of all methods of identifying birds is that which involves not chiefly the color and song but the actions, habits, habitat, and other characteristics of the various species, and in arriving at a working knowledge of this method the observer opens to himself a new angle and wide field of bird study which will afford him interest unending.

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